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BROADCAST EXCERPT

CHARLES GIBSON (HOST): Exploding C-shells, death rays, poison cigars. It all may sound like props from the latest James Bond film. But they're actually the plots and plans of the CIA in its early years, detailed in the new book, THE VERY BEST MEN. It is about the early years of the covert operations unit. It's written by Newsweek Assistant Managing Editor and Washington Bureau Chief Evan Thomas, and he's joining us this morning. Good to have you here.

EVAN THOMAS (AUTHOR, "THE VERY BEST MEN"): Hi, Charley.

GIBSON: This does sound like Q coming in from one of those scenes in a James Bond movie. Tell me about the exploding eggshells, the death rays, and the poison cigars.

THOMAS: Well, it's sort of hard to believe. But in the old days, the CIA really did try to do this stuff. They wanted to kill somebody with a death ray. They experimented with it. They never got any farther than putting a radio in a bomb in a cat. They were gonna use the tail--

GIBSON: Tail.

THOMAS: --as an antenna. But it wandered off and got hit by a truck. They had plots to try to kill--Castro is the main target in those days.

GIBSON: Sure.

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THOMAS: And Desmond Fitzgerald, who was the head of the unit trying to kill him once wanted to put an exploding C-shell off the beach where Castro scuba-dived. Why they thought Castro would pick up that particular C-shell is never clear. And in any case, they didn't do it. A lot of these plots went nowhere.

GIBSON: But does it typify a kind of mindset that existed in the early days of the agency?

THOMAS: Yeah. There was--well, there were two things. One was war. I mean, it was deadly serious. Every day these men got up and went to war against the Soviet Union. So, it was very real. But there was also an element of gamesmanship. These were sort of brilliant amateurs. They had a kind of almost gleefulness, at least, at first, about what they were doing. It was sort of fun and sport. It turned ugly. But it began with a kind of optimism.

GIBSON: Richard Helms, who was at one point head of the CIA and in one of its more flamboyant eras, I guess, once said: If you know what we know, you would see a lot of our victories. Were there victories? Or was it a--well, were there victories?

THOMAS; Not really. Not in the spying end. Our technical stuff was great. The U2 spy plane, the satellites, the thing that allows us to listen to their phones and look down the missile silos. All that was great. But in terms of espionage and covert action, not much. I actually read the CIA's own secret histories. They let me in to read 'em. And there are no surprises there. There are no great hidden victories. I know that Helms says that. But the CIA's own version of events does not have great victories. It was brave of them to even be in the arena. They're up against a tough foe. Somebody had to do it. But--and they did have some successful coups. We installed the Shah of Iran who ran the place for 25 years. We overthrew the government of Guatemala. But they also had a lot of failures--like the Bay of Pigs.

GIBSON: The CIA came out of, I think most people know, came out of counter-intelligence efforts of World War Two and what was its precursor agency. And it's interesting the kind of people who formed the CIA, because they really were--this is a dirty business, and yet these were people from privileged backgrounds, Ivy League schools, et cetera. This was all done sort of, you would have thought, with Marquess of Queensbury rules in mind.

THOMAS: Yeah. It was miscast. I mean, Charlie, I think, you went to Princeton. The Dean of Princeton would have a list of 20 seniors every year, and he'd approach them and say: How'd you like to serve your country in a different way? He was recruiting for the CIA. And in the early years, it was mostly these Ivy League guys, and they would have made great bankers or lawyers or teachers. But they really didn't make very good spies. You don't--

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you say you don't learn how to lie, cheat and steal, or, hopefully, you don't learn that at Princeton.

GIBSON: But why would they get in bed eventually with the Mafia in order to go after Castro?

THOMAS: Well, they had enormous confidence. I mean, you sort of have to dial it back for a second. The CIA was the place to be. That was the sexy, cool, front of the lines action place to be after World War Two. That's where the war was fought. So, it drew these rather gallant, brave young men to fight in this war. Once they got in that world, they felt, well, the Russians do it, we've got to do it. And they--although they weren't really suited to it, they started playing by the Russians' rules. They were also enormously confident. And Richard Bissel was running the covert action operations in the late 50s, thought, well, you know, if you're going to kill, if you need to kill somebody, hire the Mafia. They just had a kind of outrageous view of how to do it.

GIBSON: Evan Thomas. The book is THE VERY BEST MEN: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE CIA. Very interesting(?) to go back into the history of the Agency. My thanks.

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